OPINION

BY MUNA KHAN

Out on a limb

I CAME across the sweetest picture on social media of a bearded man, wearing a white knitted cap, taking a photograph of presumably his young children in front of the Christmas tree planted in Lahore. It was so heartwarming — and unexpected.

So this photograph of the father and his children in front of the tall, 13-metre tree, which was planted by Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz's administration, won the internet over with comments like "the country is healing".

She tweeted how the tree and Christmas celebrations across the province "reflects the message that minorities are not only safe in Punjab but are also valued, respected, and an integral part of the social fabric".

As one user on X wrote: [It was] "a glimpse of the country Jinnah wanted to see."

Everyone across the political divide tweeted good wishes for Christians. I hope I live long enough to see the day when Christmas wishes are expressed in a more universal spirit. At the moment, there is apprehension that any sign of inclusiveness can be misconstrued as a disrespect of religious sensitivities. What are those sensitivities? Anything that is seen as a slight to our sentiments that can result in misplaced allegations of blasphemy, for example.

A report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan last year, on "the alarming increase" in violence against minority communities in the country, makes for a depressing read. "In a chilling development, two individuals accused of blasphemy were extra-judicially killed by the police while seeking protection from hostile mobs," it read. "Such incidents underscore the urgent need for reform within law enforcement and accountability mechanisms."

Against this backdrop, a Christmas tree in Liberty seems like a very small peace offering to the minorities who live their lives under the shadow of fear. I can't deny that but I'm going out on a limb to say that the Liberty Christmas tree, and the response to it, offers a chance at optimism.

As this paper reported, "the festivities [around the tree in Liberty Chowk] were unprecedented for many, being one of the rare occasions that Christmas had been observed at a public venue on such a grand scale". It is commonplace for many officials, civilian and military, to mark Christmas at church events, sometimes as interfaith celebrations or to commemorate it by issuing wishes to Christians on Christmas. But this tree in Lahore felt different. As the paper reported, many spoke "of the thrill they experienced seeing ordinary Lahoris joining in the Christmas cheer".

This says something, even if I'm not yet sure how to define it. I dare not use hope because that gets crushed so quickly — by leaders who promise to be different only to be the same once in power. By other leaders who promise to usher in eras of economic prosperity only to crush us under the weight of taxes. Heck, even our cricketers let us down. Only we manage not to let each other down. But we're struggling to stay resilient as is expected, especially from those of us who are Karachiites.

For the last eight years or so, I have had to tell my students of the founders' pluralistic intentions for Pakistan and we always regret how they have never materialised. We know *that* Aug 11, 1947, speech because it's reproduced every Aug 14 in the papers. It's never been implemented in spirit so Jinnah's pluralistic vision is just that — a vision yet to materialise.

> One can seize the moment and look towards the future.

I'm here to suggest we let go of the past — not by erasing painful memories but by softening their hold. You can seize the moment and look towards the future. I believe the tree was a small step towards imagining something new.

I'm reminded of the opening lines from L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel, *The Go Between*, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

We don't have to be who we were. The way we have told ourselves about our founding — a betrayal of an inclusive vision, the abandonment of pluralism, the unfulfilled promises — is a story told by a country that felt trapped by its failures.

The photo of the father with his children in front of the tree tells me we don't have to live in the past anymore and that we've changed.

Maybe we can see our past as foreign because memory is unreliable. Some historians say we reconstruct the past through the lens of who we've become. Maybe we are finally becoming people who can look back at an inclusive founding vision — not as a broken promise, but as an aspiration we're finally ready to move towards. ■

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BY AIZAZ AHMAD CHAUDHRY

Looking ahead

AS Pakistan steps into 2026, seven questions dominate its foreign policy agenda and discussions. Will India once more launch hostilities against Pakistan this year given that Prime Minister Narendra Modi hasn't ended Operation Sindoor? In fact, it might be difficult for India to act aggressively this year because the world is no longer prepared to accept its false accusations that Pakistan is perpetrating terrorism against it. Second, there is a growing perception in India that it is up against two fronts — Pakistan and China. Third, the Indian armed forces may need more time and capabilities to plug the gaps that led to their defeat in May. That said, Pakistan cannot be complacent and must keep up its military preparedness.

Will India allow the Indus Waters Treaty, that it has unilaterally held in abeyance, to function is the second important question. Water means life or death. Pakistan has declared that if India disrupts or diverts the rivers allocated to it, India's action will be treated as an act of war. As attested by the recent UN report, the world community has not accepted India's pretext of terrorism to suspend the treaty (ironically, it is India, which is committing proxy terrorism in Pakistan). If, at some point, India decides to restore the IWT, Pakistan could agree to negotiate demographic, environmental and other issues as an additional protocol.

Managing, and benefiting from, the recent reset in Pakistan's ties with the US, without upsetting its partnership with China, is the third issue. Although this reset could be transactional, it is a welcome opportunity to build American stakes in Pakistan's stability through US investments in the minerals, oil and gas sectors.

As for China, this is a time-tested strategic partnership which must not be undermined. What helps Pakistan maintain ties with both powers simultaneously is the fact that today's inter-state relations are issue-based, and cooperation and confrontation can coexist. China's willingness to launch CPEC 2.0 reflects its trust in this relationship. For its part, Pakistan must address China's security concerns by asserting complete writ of the state and also addressing people's grievances in Balochistan and elsewhere through effective local governments.

The direction of Pak-Afghan ties is the fourth question dominating discussions here. Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, Pakistan is being constantly attacked by the TTP terrorists who enjoy protection in Afghanistan, with possible support from India. Pakistan has embarked on a multipronged strategy to defend itself: bilateral talks with the Taliban; multilateral diplomatic push; effective border management; and making the people in the tribal districts partners in defending Pakistan. Limited access to Pakistani ports, hospitals, and universities is beginning to hurt the Taliban amidst their internal challenges. The world is also concerned that Afghanistan is once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists.

Growing ties with the Gulf countries are a welcome development, particularly with Saudi Arabia with which Pakistan has signed a defence pact. Given the clause that aggression against one will be considered aggression against the other, will Saudi Arabia stand with Pakistan if India mounts another attack against it? This is the fifth question being asked by thought leaders. Although this agreement will operationalise mostly through peacetime defence-related activities, it adds another layer of deterrence for both countries. While Pakistan now enjoys higher esteem in the Middle East, it should stay clear of inter-Arab conflicts.

> How will Pakistan manage its foreign ties in 2026?

The sixth question is whether Pakistan and Iran will be better able to manage their borders and improve economic ties. After the 12-day war between Iran and Israel, the former has come to better appreciate the political support that Pakistan extended. Questions have also arisen about India's possible role in the Iran-Israel conflict. It is expected that Pakistan's ties with Iran will improve considerably during 2026, with a focus on cross-border trade.

How should Pakistan benefit from its economic geography is the seventh question that must be addressed to serve national economic interests. While north-south connectivity has made steady progress, east-west connectivity is severely handicapped because of India's decision to completely disconnect with Pakistan. However, this has opened up space for Pakistan and China to bilaterally and jointly promote cooperation with other South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh.

For optimal results in the above seven foreign policy arenas, Pakistan would need to prioritise political stability, continuity of economic policies, ease of doing business, capacity to negotiate better deals, and the writ of the state. ■

The writer is chairman, Sanober Institute.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Praise for Justice Patel

KARACHI: Mr. Justice Dorab F. Patel, Supreme Court Judge-designate, said yesterday [Jan 3] in Karachi that there has been a healthy co-operation between the Bar and the Bench and that has given him the greatest consolation. Speaking at the full court reference, the senior Judge of the High Court of Sind and Baluchistan said that the praises showed upon him by the Chief Justice, the Attorney-General, the Presidents of the Bar Association and the Advocate-General of Sind were "kind sentiments" which "I don't deserve". … The Chief Justice said: "Mr. Justice Patel is carrying with him very rich and scholarly experience as a great Judge to the Supreme Court… . What would be a gain for the highest Tribunal means equally great loss for this Court."

… Mr Yahya Bakhtiar, the Attorney-General, who was the first to speak as the first lawyer of the country, said that it was a rare honour for any lawyer or Judge to become a Judge of the Supreme Court. ... Mr. Justice Patel, he said, has endeared himself to all those with whom he came in contact, both as a lawyer and a Judge, because of his frankness … and generous nature. ... Law reports will speak eloquently about his qualifications, the Attorney-General said. — News agencies

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Great slaughter

TOKYO: United Nations forces were battling the advancing Communists on the northern outskirts of Seoul early on Thursday [Jan 4] as the South Korean capital went up in flames from fires lit by fleeing citizens. The blazing Chinese Communist offensive drove within six miles of Seoul on Wednesday while Mongolian cavalrymen exploiting what appeared to be breakthrough in the east raced south… .

South Korean President Syngman Rhee and other Government leaders arrived on Wednesday at their new emergency capital of Pusan on the south coast after evacuating Seoul. Chinese Nationalist diplomats also reached there. … The Chinese pushing down from Uijongbu, 11 miles north of Seoul and from the north-west, were moving in the open without camouflage despite … United Nations plane and artillery attacks that killed fearful numbers of them.

The Fifth Air Force reported its fighter bombers and light bombers blasted the Communists with bombs, flaming napalm and machineguns in 250 sorties by noon and succeeded in disrupting the Communist advance in several sectors. — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Darkness thrives as a new year begins

THE world has entered the new year with the promise of peace and dignity, but under the thunder of military drills, airstrikes and missiles. China's massive exercises around Taiwan, following Washington's multibillion-dollar arms deal with Taipei, reflect a dangerous global pattern: deterrence replaces dialogue, and force supplants diplomacy.

This militarised mindset extends far beyond East Asia. The United States, for instance, recently launched airstrikes in north-western Nigeria, clearly following a familiar script — swift military action without exhausting diplomatic or politicial solutions.

The same logic has justified repeated violations of Syrian sovereignty, reckless attacks on Iran's peaceful nuclear facilities, and now the reported US naval blockade of Venezuela, with warships positioned within striking distance. Such displays of brute power are meant to intimidate, not negotiate, while the world watches on in unsettling silence.

Powerful countries attack neighbours, hijack ships, fuel wars, and profit from the global arms trade, even as millions are killed, starved or displaced. Global institutions that are supposed to restrain excesses and protect peace, instead, remain largely paralysed.

Nowhere is this disorder more tragic than in the Middle East. Gaza bleeds without an end in sight. Children, women, journalists and aid workers are being slaughtered. The genocide is being live-streamed to a world numbed. Humanity remembers Auschwitz, and it should, but Gaza's apocalypse is denied comparable moral outrage or accountability simply because power shields the perpetrators.

Elsewhere, Russia's brutal war in Ukraine grinds on, reinforcing a grim lesson: military might erases accountability, and international law bends before strategic interests. Yet, amid all this darkness, a fundamental truth endures: the world belongs not to power elites or military establishments, but to the people. Across continents, ordinary men and women demand justice, equality, dignity and peace. Wars have not solved humanity's problems; they have multiplied them — enriching arms merchants while spreading hunger, displacement and despair.

Diplomacy today is imposed on the weak by the powerful. This hypocrisy is rooted in a post-World War II order designed by victors for victors alone — where veto power trumps justice. The world is likely to continue down this pathetic path in the new year.

One can only hope against hope that some semblance of sanity might prevail.

Qamer Soomro
Shikarpur

Austerity awaited

LIKE millions of others, I do wish that in 2026 the ruling elite of Pakistan may move towards adopting the level of austerity that has been promised frequently. It is time to exhibit the commitment and patriotism in letter and in spirit. We must realise that our salvation and survival as a nation lie in following the vision of the Quaid-i-Azam that Pakistan was created to be a modern democratic welfare state. Pakistan was definitely not created to be a state destined to revive and practice the legacy of the British Raj through allotment of state lands and titles to the elite.

The destiny of the people must only be decided by the people who live in this country, not by those who have split loyalties. The country has suffered enough.

Malik Tariq Ali
Lahore

IPL and politics

THE recent threats from India to block Bangladeshi players from participating in the Indian Premier League (IPL) exemplifies how merit and inclusivity are being challenged by misplaced nationalism, undermining the principles of neutrality and hospitality that underpin the world of international sports.

The close intertwining of political power and cricket administration has fuelled perceptions that governance decisions are driven by political calculations instead of transparency and sporting ethics.

These dynamics have produced tangible consequences, particularly for the IPL, which is facing a serious decline in brand value and investor confidence.

As perceptions of instability, political interference, and reputational risk grow, sponsors, investors and international players are being increasingly cautious, threatening the league's long-term credibility and commercial sustainability.

The targeting of Bangladeshi athletes, following a protracted pattern of hostility and exclusion towards Pakistani players, further solidifies the damaging perception in global sporting circles that India is gradually forfeiting its hard-earned status as a neutral, secure and professional venue for hosting international sports. When specific nationalities are singled out and publicly framed as unwelcome, or as political symbols, it subverts the very principle of fair and open competition.

The campaign to block Bangladeshi players directly reinforces the existing political rhetoric from certain quarters that often targets Bangladeshi immigrants and Muslim minorities. Cricket grounds and stadiums now risk becoming mere extensions of the ideological conflict playing out in the political sphere, marked by hatred and division.

If a decisive, institutional separation is not urgently effected between the autonomous sphere of sports and the advancing political-ideological agenda of Hindutva nationalism, the long-term consequences for Indian sports promise to be culturally and economically devastating. World-class athletes, premier international sporting leagues, and global governing bodies, like the International Cricket Council (ICC), may progressively distance themselves from India, unwilling to expose their players as well as their commercial interests to an environment increasingly perceived to be shaped by political hostility and unpredictability.

Abdul Basit Alvi
Muzaffarabad

Petrol smuggling

THE Prime Minister's Office (PMO) recently conveyed to the media that there has been 82 per cent jump in oil-related taxes in the July-November period as a result of a crackdown on smuggling. The news is heartening. Smuggled petrol and diesel result in huge losses to the exchequer.

However, unfortunately, the sale of smuggled petrol and diesel continues in the capital city. This commodity reaches the capital after crossing more than a thousand miles and passing through several Pakistan Customs checkposts.

There are two kiosks doing this shady business in the sector where I live. The residents have complained in writing to the local police, but to no avail.

I would tend to take such media reports with a pinch of salt. Perhaps the prime minister is either unaware or not being kept informed of the ground realities.

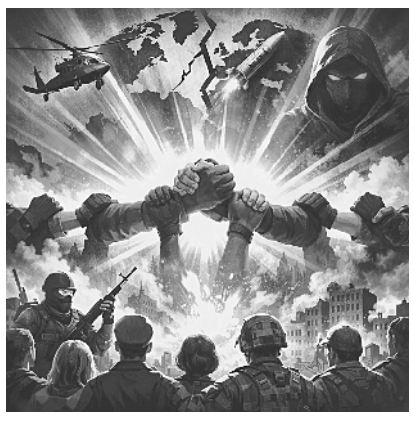
Former ambassador Javed Hafeez
Islamabad

Unity in the ranks is critical to the task of controlling terrorism

WITH 2026 already having entered our lives, it is clear that the new year demands serious and renewed resolve to control the escalating incidents of terrorism, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan.

There is a palpable concern that the focus of the top-tier political leadership on confrontational politics among various parties is inadvertently allowing space for terrorist groups to operate with increasing confidence and boldness. As such, recent events tragically underscore a perception of a vanishing state writ in certain regions.

The security situation across the country appears to be deteriorating, with major urban and supposedly secure centres, including Islamabad and Peshawar, also experiencing various shades of terrorism.



This emboldened pattern of aggression necessitates a comprehensive and immediate shift in strategy. To effectively counter this grave national security challenge, it is imperative that all institutions and political stakeholders set aside their differences and forge a united front.

The current trajectory, characterised by a loss of precious human lives and a growing sense of impunity among militant groups, is unsustainable and warrants immediate attention. Sustained stability and security require an immediate pivot from a reactive approach to a robust, coordinated and proactive response.

National consensus and unified institutional action are the only means to reassert the state's authority, dismantle all terrorist networks, and ensure the safety, security and sovereignty of the affected regions and the nation at large.

Anwar Sayab Khan
Bannu

▶ **FUEL SMUGGLING:** A troubling situation has developed at the Kantani border in Balochistan. A large number of people are now travelling to the area to obtain cheaper fuel. This uncontrolled movement not only puts lives at risk, but also causes significant damage to the provincial economy. The unregulated border fuel trade has adversely affected local transporters, traders and other businesses, resulting in financial losses across multiple sectors. If this situation continues unchecked, it will hinder economic growth. The government must regulate fuel trade at the Kantani border.
Muzammil Khan
Hub

▶ **CAMPUS SECURITY:** The recent events at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, have created fear among students and teachers, and raised concerns about campus security. In one incident, a female student and her brother were reportedly assaulted. Just days earlier, unknown individuals on a motorcycle had entered the campus and carried out aerial firing to harass a final-year female student. Several FIRs have been registered over time, but no steps have been taken yet.
Zeeshan Soomro
Larkana

▶ **AMERICAN DEAL:** The United States has agreed to upgrade Pakistan's fleet of F-16 aircraft at a cost of over $700 million. A similar amount was held up for several years by the US earlier. The government needs to tread the path forward carefully.
Shiraz Sachedina
Karachi

▶ **A DANGEROUS ROAD:** The road connecting Main Jafar Chowk with Golra has turned into a dangerous route, especially at night. While streetlight poles have been installed, the road remains unlit at night. Besides, the condition of the road itself is alarming. It is broken and has potholes across its length. I recently had an accident on the road while riding a motorcycle at night. Foggy weather in winters adds to the woes of commuters. The Capital Development Authority (CDA) should pay attention to the matter.
M. Hassan J.
Islamabad

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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